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Disclosures on CIA, FBI show common theme

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The congressional investigations of U.S. intelligence activities have produced some spectacular news stories.

It was disclosed that the FBI had sent an anonymous letter to Martin Luther King Jr., which he interpreted as a suggestion he commit suicide. And it was charged that U.S. Government officials, operating through the CIA, had ordered the assassination of two foreign leaders and had been involved in assassination plots against three other foreign officials.

Some observers detect a theme common to many of the disclosures about both the CIA and the FBI. Time and again, the two agencies failed or were thwarted in their basic function of gathering and evaluating intelligence bearing on the nation's security.

Gary Rowe, a former FBI informant, told the Senate Select Intelligence Committee that the bureau had allowed him to participate in Ku Klux Klan violence against blacks and civil-

rights advocates during the early 1960s in order to penetrate the Klan's operations. When he found out that a group of Klansmen planned to attack Freedom Riders in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1961, Mr. Rowe testified, he notified the bureau which told him "The police department is involved."

CIA officials have acknowledged that they failed to give policymakers adequate warning of such events as the outbreak of the 1973 Middle East war. On the other hand, the White House discounted or ignored skeptical CIA intelligence reports about the progress of the war in Vietnam.

Many of the activities of which the CIA and the FBI stand accused were thrust upon them by various Presidents. During the 1950s, for example, the CIA expanded its activities in the realm of covert political operations. It did so not by authority of legislation but through a number of secret National Security Council intelligence directives, which have been said to constitute the agency's "real operating constitution" or "secret charter."

Some observers believe the CIA and the FBI are still

governed by the cold war passions of the 1950s and that this, as much as anything, explains why they went astray.

"In place of monolithic communism," Seymour Hersh of the New York Times wrote last year, "the CIA is now met with fierce nationalism, the same nationalism that has been a factor in the detentes so carefully being worked out by the world's big powers."

The House and Senate intelligence committees are scheduled to wind up their investigations at the end of January and the end of February, respectively, and both are expected to recommend the establishment of a joint congressional panel to oversee the intelligence community.

But mere oversight may not be sufficient. It is possible that Congress also will undertake to rewrite the charters of both agencies, paring down and redefining their duties and responsibilities. In any event, the reputations of the CIA and the FBI have been so badly battered that officials of the U.S. intelligence community may be justified in feeling that they have nowhere to go but up.